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NINETTE DE VALOIS
and the Vic Wells Ballet

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NINETTE DE VALOIS.

Kate Neatby

**Ninette de Valois
and the Vic-Wells Ballet**

Edited by Edwin Evans

**With a Preface by
LILIAN BAYLIS, C.H.**

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FOREWORD

By LILIAN BAYLIS

I believe we are on the threshold of a great renaissance of ballet in England; and that this renaissance will be characterized by the fact that English dancers, no longer hiding under foreign pseudonyms, will be acknowledged here, as they have long been abroad, as truly fine exponents of the most difficult and comprehensive of all the arts.

When I was a young woman, I dreamed of a great temple where the three theatrical arts, drama, opera and dancing, could be housed. Some nine years ago Ninette de Valois came to me and revealed that she had been dreaming a very similar dream; she wanted to create an English school of ballet, attached to a theatre, where the dancers could have real and constant stage experience.

At that time our Shakespeare and Opera companies were crowding each other out of the shabby Old Vic. But there was a movement on foot to acquire and rebuild the derelict Sadler's Wells and hand it over to our management. What was an impossibility in one ordinary building might be feasible in two under the same control. Ninette de Valois bided her time. She devised the dances in our operas and plays, with a scratch company rehearsed in odd corners, in bars and dressing-rooms, and drew up her big scheme. When it was certain that we would open Sadler's Wells in 1931

she persuaded me to give one whole evening each fortnight to ballet performances. Frankly I confess I did not believe these could be anything but an artistic success. I was wrong. There was, apparently, a public in London that had been waiting for just this experiment.

We opened Sadler's Wells in 1931—a ghastly year, financially speaking—nailing to our mast the fact that we were out to establish permanent British opera and ballet. Constant Lambert became our conductor, and we had proper practice quarters. (These, in 1934, we have already outgrown, and must acquire new space next season). During the grave difficulties of those first years, the ballet evenings, now once a week, were uniformly successful at the new theatre; the presence of these young, beautiful, radiantly fit girls and boys, delighted at last to learn their job in a real London theatre, cheered us on and made us determine that for the sake of ballet alone our wild experiment must not fail. And it was ballet, to a tremendous extent, that put Sadler's Wells on the map. Lopokova, Phyllis Bedells, Idzikowski and Anton Dolin were most generous in dancing with our new company, of which Markova became the leading dancer, and the presence of Adeline Genée in our audience was a continual inspiration.

It has been a great source of pleasure to me that British composers, as well as British dancers, have had a chance under the new scheme. Vaughan Williams's "Job," originally choregraphed for the Camargo Society (which has now put its resources at our disposal) is agreed to be a milestone in the history of ballet; Elgar's "Nursery Suite," Gavin

Gordon's "Regatta" and "Scorpions of Ysit"; Bliss's "Rout," Lambert's "Pomona"; Toye's "Douanes" and "The Haunted Ballroom" have proved that native dancers need never lack inspiration from native composers. Nor is there a lack of English designers and choreographers—MacKnight Kauffer, Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell, William Chappell, Frederick Ashton, Hedley Briggs, to name a few at random.

Yes, I believe British ballet to-day has a better chance of survival than it has had throughout the ages.

INTRODUCTION.

The astonishing growth of a ballet public in England of late years has given rise to a natural fear—that dependent as we have been to a large extent on short seasons by visiting companies, some mischance might leave us for a whole year with no Russian Ballet. That is one reason, and a very good one, for the increasing interest in a national ballet. The other is quite as obvious, if not so immediately pressing. Surely we have it in us as a nation to produce a ballet worth the name, and one which will not be a slavish imitation of any other school. Not that it can be lost sight of for a moment that pre-revolutionary Russia saw ballet at the height of its development as an art, and that all who desire to excel in any department of that art must study her results and the methods by which she achieved them, not necessarily in order to copy them, but to make use of all that can be regarded as not strictly national in character.

It has often been said that England could not, if she would, produce a ballet, because (and this was added as a slightly contemptuous reproach) she had not the temperament. This is just another way of saying that she cannot produce a replica of Russian ballet because the temperament which she *has* got is not Russian. The retort which grows more common among those who have the future of British ballet at heart is that they have no desire to embark on the forlorn hope of remaking personalities to suit foreign media.

The Russians they will continue to enjoy as the most perfect exponents of the art so far, and every possible opportunity will be taken to achieve their technical perfection, for the technique of the art may surely be regarded as international. Even their methods in acquiring that perfection may be found useful, but cannot be adapted in their entirety to English needs. With the gradual increase in British composers who write specially for ballet, British choreographers who are treating native themes, and English men and women who plan to make dancing their profession, we feel with Miss Baylis that the outlook grows more and more encouraging.

Of course, the development will be slow, but it will be fascinating to watch. Through the work of Miss de Valois in conjunction with the Vic-Wells organization we can already attend a full night of ballet once a week throughout the winter, and see, besides such old friends as "Sylphides," "Casse Noisette," and "Giselle," works by modern English choreographers, including Frederick Ashton, and by Miss de Valois herself. Her ballets bear, in conception and execution, the stamp of originality and modernism without ever losing the background afforded by her own thorough classical training, a background which she considers essential to all her pupils.

Miss de Valois, as producer and choreographer, and as director of the only theatre school of ballet in Britain, has had and will have in the future more to say than anyone else as to the direction which the development of ballet will take. Her audiences feel confident that this responsibility will never be abused.

CHAPTER I.

BEFORE THE VIC-WELLS.

Miss de Valois has been heard to remark that her life is one long effort to cram thirty hours' work into twenty-four, and this one has found to be perfectly true. She cannot plead as an excuse for this passion for hard work that she was late in starting, because she had completed years of accomplished stage performance when the average English girl is beginning to appear as an extra.

Her very early training she regards as less than negligible, even prejudicial, as it got her into bad habits and delayed her subsequent development. Nevertheless, her teachers must have recognized her exceptional aptitude and have brought her to a certain pitch of efficiency, for at the age of fourteen she appeared in pantomime at the Lyceum, and her professional career has continued without a break ever since. Miss de Valois regards performing now as the smallest part of her work—in fact she says that with her small opportunities for practice she should really not appear at all—but those who see her in such ballets as she does undertake remember her long career with Diaghilev, which followed four years of pantomime engagements, appearances for the Beecham Opera Company at Covent Garden, and study with Espinosa, Cecchetti, Nijinska and others. She regards her time with Diaghilev as the most helpful period of her training, because it offered ever-new opportunities of perfecting her technique. The work was gruelling, but that would no doubt make it all the more to her taste. She danced for

Diaghilev in Belgium, France, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, Italy and London. A pleasant memory is two six-months' seasons in Monte Carlo, but even this time was crammed with rehearsals of new ballets.

Miss de Valois did some production work for Diaghilev, and these first attempts at choreography must have filled her with an enthusiasm for this means of expression, and a desire to do some creative work of her own. A step in this direction was the opening of a school in London, the Academy of Choregraphic Art, and soon Miss de Valois had creative scope to her heart's content. In an incredibly short space of time she became choregraphic director to the Festival Theatre, Cambridge, director of the School of Ballet at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, and producer of their ballets, and director of ballet at the Old Vic. This last involved at first the arranging of incidental dances in the Shakespearean productions as well as in the operas, and small curtain-raising ballets before the latter, undertaken with amazing success considering the dearth of corps de ballet material. This field was, however, to develop into very much of a full-time job in the near future. Yet until 1930 Dublin and Cambridge really offered her more scope for the exercise of her talents, for reasons which will appear.

For one whose ambition had been directed towards the legitimate stage an opportunity to direct the integrally important part of the chorus in the "Oresteia" of Aeschylus must have been something of an event. Miss de Valois had every opportunity to make the most of her ideas, for without being unduly lavish, this was a production which spared no



DANSE SACRÉE ET DANSE PROFANE.

effort or expense to secure the required effect. It aroused excited comment, because while all were delighted, none was quite sure whether he should have been. It was a partially, but not completely stylized presentation of Greek tragedy, and thus rather fell between two stools as far as the critics were concerned—the realist complained of the masks and the unnatural intonation, and the conventionalist complained of the incongruity of a being of normal size wearing a mask at all, and sighed for a genuine Greek production complete with stilts.

On one point, however, the critics were unanimous—the brilliant choregraphy of Miss de Valois, particularly in her treatment of the Furies and the Trojan Bondwomen; such phrases as “It would be difficult to remember a better chorus than here in this production” echoing from *The Gownsmen* to the *London Times*, and this when the critics were by no means unsparing of condemnation with regard to other departments of the production. Such a success for a first attempt is interesting in itself, but for us it has also the significance lent by Miss de Valois’s subsequent great artistic triumph in “Job.” It is probably safe to say that if there had been no “Oresteia” as far as she was concerned, there would have been no “Job” either.

For the Festival Theatre Miss de Valois also directed the dancing in “Prometheus” and “Œdipus,” but possibly because they were intrinsically inferior, or possibly because they were robbed of novelty and of climax by the “Oresteia,” they did not achieve the same fame. For all these productions her own Academy supplied the corps de ballet material.

A brief glance must be turned to Miss de Valois's work in Ireland. It may trouble many to understand how she contrived to direct ballets in Cambridge and Dublin and London at one and the same time. Cambridge was, of course, comparatively easy. She says that milk trains now hold no terrors for her. The work at Dublin was carried on by means of quarterly visits.

Miss de Valois's very suitable artistic connection with her native country was opened through W. B. Yeats seeing her work at the Cambridge Festival Theatre. He was so much impressed by its originality and force that he inquired further, and on discovering that Miss de Valois was an Irishwoman his enthusiasm was naturally doubled, and he broached to her a favourite scheme for the interpretation in ballet of Irish legendary and folk tales. As a result of their discussions the Abbey School of Ballet was founded in Dublin under her direction. Individual productions at the Abbey Theatre are of less interest, except for a short play "Fighting the Waves," which with its masks and weird modern sets again suggests the sort of production in which Miss de Valois finds herself most at home. Although the direction of the School had to be relinquished, she continued to produce ballets for the Abbey Theatre even after the opening of Sadler's Wells and the growth in her activities for the Vic-Wells School.



THE OLD VIC AND SADLER'S WEL

CHAPTER II.

BEGINNINGS OF THE VIC-WELLS BALLET.

"The Theatre which presented 'atrocious melodramas fit only for an audience of felons,' which served up 'loathsome vice and depravity,' and whose influence for evil tainted the very neighbourhood in which it stood—that same theatre to-day is an influence for honesty, and deals only in wares of good repute."

—CICELY HAMILTON in "History of the Old Vic."

"Good repute" is stating the case very conservatively. It must be a perpetual source of surprise to visitors to London that for the modest sum of sixpence, if that is all they can afford, they can see the works of Shakespeare and other English classics, opera, and ballet done by excellent performers, and with no obvious hampering little economies in the details of production. The story of this achievement is most interestingly told in the book by Miss Hamilton and Miss Baylis up to the acquisition of Sadler's Wells. The addition of a weekly ballet is a more recent development, reached by an arduous route of curtain raisers with a half-trained corps de ballet, and must cause Miss Baylis as much satisfaction in the contemplation as did a week of properly produced opera when she looked back on the old weekly "operatic concerts" introduced for the good of the artistic souls of the coffee-music-hall audience of former days.

The artistic achievement is all the greater, inasmuch as when the work started Miss Cons, who was its originator,

had not artistic but far more pressing moral ends in view. It was announced when the Old Vic was opened as a coffee-music-hall—"It is not proposed to provide for a higher class of audience than that which at present frequents music-halls, but only to offer that class an entertainment which shall amuse without degrading them, and to which men may take their wives and children without shaming or harming them."

To a present-day frequenter of the Old Vic gallery this ambition seems comparatively modest, when amongst other things one may see a small boy of eight, certainly little above the music-hall class, instructing his parent in what he may expect to happen next in a performance of "The Tempest." But to Miss Cons it probably seemed a difficult enough task, and indeed plenty of effort and worry, not to mention hard cash, have been combined to produce this result so desirable both morally and artistically.

Vic-Wells ballet began with small curtain-raising performances before opera at the Old Vic. There were ten such productions during 1929 and 1930. They were so well received, especially by the gallery, that Miss Baylis began to entertain high hopes for the future of the venture and of its effect on British ballet when later on she would have two theatres in her hands.

The Sadler's Wells Theatre opened in January, 1931. At that time the Vic-Wells company consisted of seven permanent members, all women, and all still with the Vic. During the first five months of the theatre's history four new

opera-ballets were produced as well as numerous incidental dances. The popularity which the opera-ballets earned inevitably encouraged Miss Baylis and Miss de Valois to the then very daring departure of a gala ballet night.

With the performance of May 5th at the Old Vic, Vic-Wells ballet may be considered to have established once and for all its significance for the development of a national ballet for England. The house could have been sold out over and over again, due partly to the fact that Anton Dolin in his enthusiasm for the cause had offered to appear, not to mention Stanley Judson and Leslie French. At the close of the performance Miss de Valois received an almost embarrassingly enthusiastic ovation.

With the 1931-2 season fortnightly nights of ballet were introduced, and the Camargo Society production of "Job" was fortunately made available for a larger audience. The permanent company now numbered twelve, and extras were drawn from the theatre's school of ballet.

In the autumn of 1932, with the remarkable growth in the company's repertoire, and with the growing enthusiasm of the Sadler's Wells ballet audiences, a weekly ballet was considered practicable, and has been the rule ever since.

The permanent company now numbers about a score, with excellent extra material always at hand, and its repertoire is large and varied.

CHAPTER III.

THE SCHOOL OF BALLET.

The problem of the training of dancers is obviously a vital one. Not all the composers and choreographers in the world can produce a ballet worth seeing without artistic and accomplished performers. There is a tendency to feel that because the Imperial School produced so many geniuses, its methods must be followed step by step if we are to emulate its success. A complete adoption of the system is, of course, rendered impossible by the fact that British art is quite unsubsidised by the Government. In this particular case the result may not after all be so unfortunate. It is questionable whether Russian methods would succeed in England. Few cultured English families would surrender their children at a comparatively tender age to an undeniably rigorous mental and physical training. They require more freedom. Devotees of the Russian system feel that this simply means resigning any hope of a respectable ballet. We trust not. Miss de Valois has every hope that the Vic-Wells School will adapt itself to meet the national temper and special requirements of the British public without any sacrifice of artistic achievement. The best sign that she is not mistaken is the amazing development of the Vic-Wells corps de ballet over three years—less than half the time stipulated by the most conservative as required to make a dancer.

Miss de Valois's pupils come to her at about fourteen years. She says that no useful purpose could be served by starting their training earlier, since English girls are physi-

cally three years behind Continentals. The course lasts for three years. At the end of this time the more accomplished dancers are drafted into the corps de ballet at a small salary. That is the great advantage which her school enjoys—the pupils are actually trained in the theatre. They live from the first in an atmosphere of rehearsals and stage performance. Then when they are required to appear as extras in the large productions they and the producer are saved all the nervous wear and tear attendant on introducing perfectly raw material to the region behind the footlights. Thus of the seven years which Miss de Valois reckons must go to the making of a dancer, four can be spent actually on the stage. This lessens the heavy cost of training and doubles the intelligence and efficiency of the student, for teaching is naturally far more valuable when the pupil is finding by actual experience just what she wants, and receives a constant urge from stage appearances to improve her technique as quickly as possible.

The chief criticism which might be levelled at the Vic-Wells school is that it makes no provision for any but technical training, which, as all agree, can never of itself produce a dancer. This is no doubt not an ideal arrangement, and will probably not persist any longer than chill penury dictates. The idea that the policy is dictated by indifference to the mental capacity and development of the pupils is very far from the truth. Miss de Valois would be the last person to take such an attitude, for it is one of her cardinal principles that technical brilliance is only half the battle. One was naturally prompted to inquire how Miss de Valois herself,

whose dancing training started at the age of seven, had managed to attend to the other side. Her condemnation of herself as completely uneducated was modified to self-educated, and if the teacher is competent, what could be better? In her case, at least, the result leaves little to be desired. Her words recalled a remark made by Mr. Richardson in the *Dancing Times* to the effect that he attributed Miss de Valois's success to the fact that she learned at an early age "not only how to dance, but how to think. From the beginning the term 'dancer' meant something more to her than an individual who could execute brilliant steps with faultless accuracy. Though she always considered a perfect knowledge of the traditional technique a necessity for any dancer, yet, whilst she was developing her body in constant practice *à la barre* and in the 'centre' she was also at the same time developing her mind, and learning all she could about contemporary art and modern thought."

However, it would be a very dangerous policy to trust girls, even girls of fourteen who have had secondary school training, to make the most of their mental capacity without careful guidance. At present no provision can be made for further training in the school, but Miss de Valois believes that none of the girls were neglected in this respect. The fees of the school, while not high, are sufficient to ensure that the parents are in a position to give their children further instruction during the considerable time left free from work at the school. Miss de Valois considers that an ordinary school routine at this juncture for girls who intend



MISS DE VALOIS AS THE JACKDAW
"THE JACKDAW AND THE PIGEONS"

to make dancing their profession would be deadening, and prefers to see her pupils concerned with such subjects as will develop their imagination and supply such technical knowledge as will assist them in their profession. She considers languages, history, and literature, particularly the drama, suitable fare for them.

In addition to the regular school there are classes for small children. This was not part of the original policy of the Vic-Wells, but so many requests were made that classes were started.

There are also classes two nights a week for business girls. There is no real ballet material to be found here—the classes are just fun while in progress, and their effect is, of course, to enable the girls to appreciate the intricacies in the technique of their favourite art much more fully.

The members of the present corps de ballet are almost without exception graduates of the school, and their constantly increasing efficiency is the best testimony to Miss de Valois's genius as a teacher.

CHAPTER IV.

MISS DE VALOIS AS PERFORMER.

Miss de Valois says that she really has no business now to appear on the stage, since she has so little time for practice, but it would be a genuine disappointment to her audience if an entire evening passed without an appearance, if only a brief one. She is a living illustration of her own theory, that technical capacity, however essential, is a small part of the equipment of a true artist of the dance. All the originality and dramatic sense which has made her a producer and choreographer enter into her performances to perfect them. This remarkable dramatic capacity leads one to wonder why it did not seek expression through the usual channel—the legitimate stage. It is an interesting fact that as a child all Miss de Valois's aspirations centred on a stage career. By an odd coincidence we owe two outstanding personalities of English ballet to-day to the same misadventure, if one can be persuaded to regard it as such. Both Anton Dolin and Ninette de Valois were forced comparatively early in life (the latter at fourteen years) to abandon any idea of a career on the legitimate stage owing to trouble with their voices. When one considers the ample attention lavished on the latter branch of art by capable and gifted people it seems a matter for thankfulness that these two were directed by circumstance to a more neglected field, and one in which they have been able to do wonders. The scope permitted them is after all as great. Perugini says in his *Art of Ballet*, "Personally I feel that acting *without* words implies



**NINETTE DE VALOIS AND ANTON DOLIN
IN "DOUANES."**

a greater technical advance in the art of representation than acting *with* them, for it makes the actor more than merely repeater, or even interpreter, of an author; *it makes him partly creator or author.*" Many of Miss de Valois's roles are illustrations of this.

Nowadays Miss de Valois rarely appears in severely classical roles, but seems to prefer more mimetic and often almost comic parts, such as those she takes in "Douanes," "Rendezvous" and "The Enchanted Grove." In her selection she is no doubt influenced partly by the fact that with production and teaching she has no time for the sustained and detailed roles which she could undertake so successfully for Diaghilev, but probably even more by personal taste, which prompts her to indulge her liking for characters which give much scope for mime, and which suit her so well. If fate had granted her wish and placed her on the legitimate stage, she would not, one feels, have found tragedy her medium—at least not the type of tragedy that is usually available for mimetic representation—"Giselle" for example. She is too crisp and practical and has the wrong sort of sense of humour. Imagination stumbles at the thought of her taking herself very seriously as the forsaken and demented heroine of this ballet—she is more at home as the crisply stepping courtesan of "The Enchanted Grove" or the shockingly opportunist tight-rope walker of "Douanes." When she appears the spectator feels that the story has taken a significant turn, and it must be obvious to all that accomplished as she is technically the spectacular element in her art means nothing compared with its dramatic effect.

Her audiences wish that she would appear oftener, but would readily admit on reflection that her production work is of more permanent importance, and get into the habit of welcoming her comparatively infrequent appearances, in roles already mentioned, and in "Coppelia," "The Jackdaw and the Pigeons," and many others.

CHAPTER V.

MISS DE VALOIS AS PRODUCER AND CHOREGRAPHER.

“ Ballets, being regular representations, ought to unite the various parts of the drama. Most of the subjects adapted to the dancer are devoid of sense, and exhibit only a confused jumble of scenes, equally unmeaning and unconnected; yet it is in general absolutely necessary to confine oneself within certain rules. The historical part of a ballet must have its exposition, its incidents, its dénouement. The success of this kind of entertainment chiefly depends on choosing good subjects and dealing with them in a proper manner.” (Jean Georges Noverre).

Plays are Miss de Valois's favourite literary food. Unlike most of us, who prefer to see a play acted, she would rather read it, because she so often finds the production lacking in imagination. In reading, the play can be specially acted and produced to her own very critical taste! It was probably a fortunate accident for her as well as for ballet which diverted her energies from the legitimate stage, because she would almost certainly, even in production work, have found her ideas hampered to a much greater extent, for there is far more room for real creative work in choregraphy and ballet production generally than in ordinary stage work.

Not that Miss de Valois does not believe in careful discipline of the dancing to the music. In the type of ballet which she prefers to create, dramatic effect is indeed her chief end, but she never forgets that all ballet is also a

musical performance. The dramatic climax therefore cannot be independent, but must be dictated and supported by the musical climax. Thus, although she would be better able than most choreographers to stand the test, she has no sympathy with those who clamour for dramatic or dance critics for ballet. She believes that only sound musical criticism will maintain the highest standards, either musical or dramatic.

What sort of ballets does Miss de Valois produce? The majority may be loosely termed "modern." A large number are humorous and whimsical, depending for interest on original decor, interesting story and clever mime. Of this type are "The Jackdaw and the Pigeons," "Douanes" and many others. On the other hand there are the dignified impressive ballets such as "Job" and "La Création du Monde." For the most part her ballets do not run to tours de force on the part of the dancers. They depend very little on exhibitions of technical skill for their attraction, and much more on dramatic effect. In this she is a true disciple of Diaghilev, who in later years tended to neglect the mere beauty of the dance in order to stress the dramatic and musical aspects of his productions. Lovers of ballet felt that this was very well when he had the Imperial School to draw upon for performers, but they foresaw lean years and feared a serious decline in the quality and scope of his repertoire if this policy continued and developed, since it did not tend to keep up the supply of really accomplished dancers.

Fortunately Miss de Valois recognizes very clearly the dangers attendant on even temporary neglect of technique.

While keenly interested in all modern developments in dancing, she remembers what the more revolutionary members of the modern German school of character dancers have lost sight of, that this sort of specialization originated with artists who had already a thorough classical training upon which to build.

For perfect technique even in the more modern forms of dance expression this background is more than desirable, for complete and balanced physical control is practically impossible without it. Miss de Valois's conviction—a fortunate one for the future of British ballet—is that if such a background is desirable technically, it is quite indispensable artistically. To the lack of it she attributes a certain slight atmosphere of vulgarity which pervades most performances of ultra-modern ballet. Thus, while very few of her own productions run on conventionally classical lines, this is a mere matter of personal taste in self-expression, and the Vic-Wells repertoire is at least half devoted to monuments of classical ballet such as "Sylphides" and "Lac des Cygnes," and also includes such pleasing neo-classical works as Ashton's "Rendezvous" and "Lord of Burleigh." Her corps de ballet is, therefore, in no danger of stiffening muscles—and on the other hand with productions like "Job" and "Création du Monde" to master they are still less in danger of atrophied intellects if they perform them sympathetically.

Having received a score, Miss de Valois does not call a rehearsal. She summons her pianist and ascertains from the

music just what dramatic effects are required, and the number and quality of the climaxes. An outstanding trait of all her major productions is their perfect unity of feeling and effect. They are never scrappy, but like a well-produced play they march unerringly and with cumulative effect to their highest point. This is achieved by producing from the whole to the part. Instead of going painstakingly through the ballet from beginning to end, and setting each movement, she attends to the climax, and her work here dictates the style in which the whole production is to be treated. This feeling for true dramatic effect plays a larger part than anything else in making her work so satisfying artistically.

Even with the music well in hand she is not ready for her performers. She produces her ballets on paper. The grouping and lighting effects are all studied and sketched in from scene to scene. The advantages of the plan are manifold. It is possible rapidly to study dozens of effects and decide on the best without the burden of many rehearsals in which the corps de ballet are shifted experimentally from point to point on the stage. This might not work out well without the blessing of a good visual imagination, which enables her to know exactly from a few rough lines and curves how each grouping will look from the auditorium.



A SCENE FROM "JOB."

JOB.

" You see, it was only a British thing. So no one cares."

—(" The People," July 12th, 1931).

The first performance of " Job " was described by *The Times* as " that rare thing, a completely satisfying synthesis of the arts." Few who have seen it would care to cavil even at such praise as this. As music, as dancing, as drama, almost as painting, it could stand alone, and when all these are blended with unerring sympathy it is inevitable that many spectators should go away feeling it to be the most perfect artistic experience they have known. It was no mere spectacular first night success, pleasing by novelty, but has proved its growing appeal over and over again to packed audiences at the Vic and Wells.

Strangely enough, Miss de Valois does not regard " Job " as her best work. She reserves that honour for " La Création du Monde." In fact, as the curtain descended on the dress rehearsal of the Camargo Society production she was so disgusted that she felt incapable of facing anyone, and was amazed at the confident predictions of success.

" Job " is not pure ballet. It is called " A Masque for Dancing," and indeed, important as the dancing is, it is not, if we except the part of Satan, of an exacting nature.

The music was performed in concert form long before the Camargo Society production, but it was composed for ballet, and it would not be good ballet music if it did not miss much of its grandeur when performed without interpretation in

colour and movement. The ballet itself is, however, so vivid that one performance gives the music something that would always remain associated with it when heard independently.

Vaughan Williams had the "Vision" in mind when the music was composed, or perhaps the production could never have achieved the perfect unity of feeling for which it is so remarkable. It follows the story of Job's temptation, his fall and subsequent restoration to God's favour, in eight scenes. For the convenience of those who have not seen the ballet, and to save a summary, the brief programme notes are reproduced in an appendix. It is a comparatively short ballet, the scenes following closely upon one another, and none of the dances are long or elaborate. When the curtain falls, one feels that it is quite impossible to appreciate the full imaginative force of the production at one performance. And yet it stands one extreme test—the spectator is not, during the performance, conscious of admiration for the ingenuity of the producer. So smooth and perfect is the ballet that it is only on subsequent reflection that one realizes how much art must have been employed, and how much more was required to conceal that art.

Miss de Valois takes very little credit to herself for any creative imagination in connection with "Job," simply saying that when she came to study Blake she found all she wanted. The fact that it has taken us well over a century to realize with any certainty that Blake merits careful study, indicates that not everyone would have been capable of appreciating the wealth of material to be found in his work, or could have used it with such complete sympathy and understanding.

To reproduce accurately certain set pictures from Blake's "Vision" could have presented little difficulty to one of Miss de Valois's experience, but to mould the whole series into continuous and harmonious movement was quite a different matter. It would have been fatally easy to give an impression of scrambling hastily from one tableau to another, but nothing could be further from the effect, which is one of slow controlled movement, passing inevitably from one stage of Job's temptation to the next. There is no descent in quality from one moment to another. Even the fiercest Blake maniac could not say "There is a Blake grouping" and sigh at the transition to the next. It was generally remarked at the time of the first production that the transitions were so perfect as always to seem logical continuations of the rhythms inherent in Blake's illustrations. Still, there are some to whom the slightest divergence from or addition to the works of their idol, however sympathetic it may be, is sacrilege. One person sighed to Miss de Valois over one of the most beautiful effects in the ballet—the weirdly-lighted crossed hands of the figures bowing before the usurped throne—saying that while it was no doubt very effective, it was not Blake!

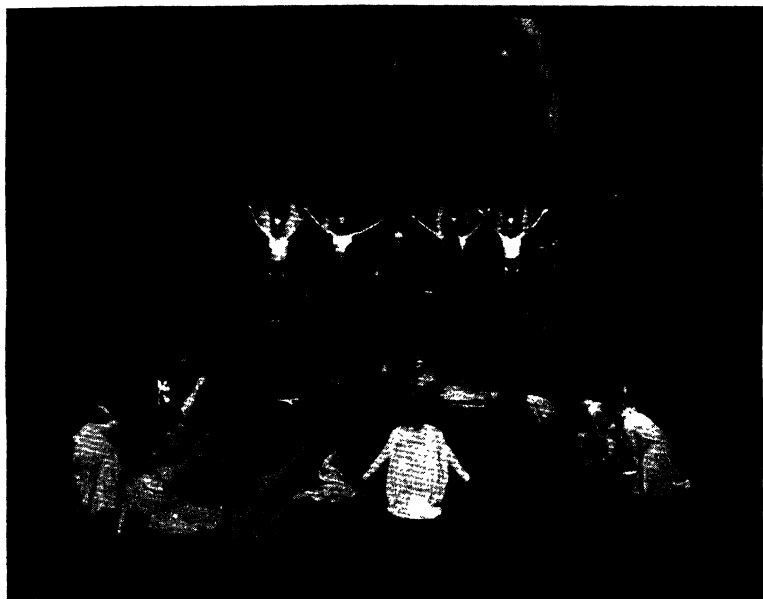
Such was the seriousness with which the whole production was faced by all those concerned, that no outcry whatever was made about the treatment of biblical matter in ballet; nor did the appearance of a thinly-veiled Delty on the stage meet with the criticism that might have been confidently expected.

If one aspect of Miss de Valois's stagecraft contributes more than another to the total effect of the ballet, it is her command of lighting. "Job" depends on skilful lighting more than most ballets, and the problem of securing exactly the right effect with the impassive group of Job and his wife, the wildly leaping Satan, or other visitors, and the heavenly host, is always triumphantly solved.

The solemnity of the announcement of Job's losses was slightly marred on the first occasion on which I saw the ballet by an all too audible whisper in the neighbourhood "That reminds me, I haven't heard from the Inland Revenue yet," but even this was in a way a tribute to the realism of the ballet, and after all its creators cannot be held responsible if, having succeeded in moving their audience deeply, the emotion was not always just what might have been expected !

"Job" cannot be dismissed without a word concerning the beautiful scenery and costumes which were perfectly "Blake," and the exceedingly effective masks of War, Pestilence and Famine.

Fortunately the ballet is now a permanent part of the Vic-Wells repertoire, and is thus easily accessible to a large public.



"JOB "
FINAL SCENE.

LA CRÉATION DU MONDE.

Miss de Valois regards this ballet as her best work. It is very probably true that she has put her best creative effort into it, yet it is not surprising that her audiences vote for "Job" in preference. "La Création du Monde" for all its virtues is not the perfectly finished production which we see in "Job"; nor is it a theme quite so likely to appeal on first sight to the average spectator. It merits far more frequent performance. This would clear up any slight faults which have survived, and would acclimatize the public to an unusual but very intriguing piece of work. It is rather neglected because of the necessity of blacking the entire corps de ballet, a work of time both in accomplishment and removal, which makes it a difficult number to fit into a programme which requires in the main white faces.

The music by Darius Milhaud suits the theme of the origin of mankind at the hands of the Pacific Gods of Easter Island. The settings are remarkable and here again we are amazed at the genius of the lighting effects. The gradual resolution of a heap of tangled limbs into almost human forms, although so totally different, is equal in light and shadow and movement to anything in "Job."

It is to be hoped that the obvious difficulties of production will not prevent this work appearing several times in next year's programme.

THE FOOLISH VIRGINS.

Miss de Valois should shortly earn a name for favouring biblical subjects, and certainly the themes suggested by Holy

Writ are diverse, as two such ballets as "Job" and this prove. It is a slight but very pleasing work, set to Atterberg's music. No attempt is made at great dignity, or to enforce the moral of the parable, and for this reason it might, I suppose, meet with objections which a work like "Job" could never merit. Still, it makes an admirably light-hearted ballet, and the subject could scarcely stand serious treatment in such a medium. The choregraphy is particularly apt, and provides an excellent part for Markova as the Bride. A great deal of the charm of this particular production derives from William Chappell's costumes, which while rather mediæval than strictly biblical, are particularly pleasing.

THE SCORPIONS OF YSIT.

This very clever ballet is set to Gavin Gordon's music, which has a queerly deliberate and detached flavour. Miss de Valois has caught this exactly, and the whole ballet is pervaded by a feeling of aloofness. The Goddess Ysit moves in a truly regal manner about the stage, and her attendant Scorpions, whose costumes, incidentally, are excellent, attend to her comfort by discovering a marsh cottage where she may rest. Their first attempt is foiled by the frightened marsh woman, whose baby they sting to death in revenge. But Ysit is above petty reprisals, and cures the child, and all ends happily. The ballet is distinctly humorous in tone, and although the marsh woman's dance over her dead child is an excellent piece of mime, no use is made of lighting effects to heighten the tragedy—it would not be in keeping with the cool and reserved tone of the rest of the ballet.

Miss de Valois is very happy in this sort of production. She gladly escapes from the merely conventional, romantic and pretty-pretty to more colourful or even slightly bizarre themes.

THE HAUNTED BALLROOM.

After the success of Geoffrey Toye's "Douanes," composed specially for the Vic-Wells Company, we expected another collaboration with Miss de Valois, and this ballet will probably enjoy even greater popularity than its shorter and lighter predecessor.

"The Haunted Ballroom" tells a weird story which could make no serious appeal to any spectator against his will, but such is our appetite for thrills that when we read the arguments we prepare to shiver with apprehension and when the time comes we are duly terrified. Our terror, even though partially self-induced, is still a very genuine score for the production, as this sort of theme requires most careful and effective preparation and performance to escape unintentionally humorous effects. In this age it would be too much to ask for an effect as enduring as that of "The Castle of Otranto" which made the poet Gray afraid to go to bed. Our fear subsides with the curtain, but is nevertheless very enjoyable while it lasts.

The theme is that of a ballroom in which the heads of the house have met their death in turn for centuries. The young heir is persuaded by three guests who are at a ball in the unhaunted ballroom to take them to this more exciting region

of the house. He does so, and they persuade him to dance. The master of the house finds them there and dismisses his son, telling his guests the reason for his alarm. They leave him and he remains for a few minutes while the realization breaks upon him that his turn has come. That night he comes down to find that a player has summoned a troupe of dancers. They persuade him to dance with them and will not permit him to stop until he dances himself to death in pursuit of the beautiful Alicia, one of his guests of the previous evening, who is impersonated by one of the spirits. He is found by the household, and the curtain falls at exactly the right moment on his son, now in the same state of terrified realization which his father had experienced earlier, that he too would some day meet his end in the haunted ballroom.

While scarcely on a par with a theme like the temptation of Job, this is a good romantic tale with ample opportunity for effective choreography and expressive mime, and Miss de Valois has missed nothing which could improve the dramatic quality of the production.

The chief problem of the ballet is to maintain the illusion in the second act that the performers, with the exception of Tregennis, are spirits. In this it is triumphantly successful. It is achieved by two sharp contrasts, first between the mirthful and coquettish dance of the three guests in the first and their dance when represented by spirits in the second, and then by the more obvious contrast between the desperation of Tregennis, and the cool, unmoved, almost inevitable quality

in the dance of the spectres. There is no joy or gaiety in it, only a peculiar detached lightness. They dance more quickly as Tregennis becomes more desperate, but never with any emotion. Some of the groupings in this act are extraordinarily good, and gain in effectiveness by the queer, mask-like headdresses and the narrow but trailing sleeves of the dancers.

Unusual lighting effects were remarkably good, and this ballet, like "Job," depends on lighting to an exceptional degree.

An interesting experiment would be to present a *ballet d'action* without an argument printed in the programme, and request the audience to supply their own and submit it afterwards. This would be a hard test for a perfectly wordless performance, but I think "The Haunted Ballroom" could almost survive it. The music is expressive and the choreography so well matched to it that when performed as on the first occasion with the enthusiasm which Markova, Freda Bamford and Robert Helpman brought to some of the leading parts the action should need little explanation.

"The Haunted Ballroom" does not rank with productions like "Job"—it was not intended to, but it will add a pleasant variety to the Vic-Wells repertoire.

DOUANES.

This is in a very different vein of sentiment from "Job" and "The Haunted Ballroom." It is a lesson to us that there is humour in everything, for Mr. Toye and Miss de

Valois have found a succession of very funny situations in the Customs House. In what might be described as neo-Victorian garb the large and carefully graduated Smith family arrive with their conspicuously labelled band-boxes. In sharp contrast is the dashing tightrope walker who quite absorbs the attention of Cook's man, and later on of her fellow sufferers too, for she is kind enough to divert their attention from their sorrows by a very lively professional performance. The regrettable discovery of a number of contraband articles leaves no ill feeling, nor does the flirtation of the dancer permanently alienate her husband, for the ballet closes with a care-free country dance in which gendarmes, passengers and all concerned take part. "Douanes" is a short ballet which moves quickly and shows no rough edges.

The music is perfectly expressed by the ingenious choregraphy, which is also ideal for the company, reminding us with "The Haunted Ballroom" how successful this collaboration with a particular company in view can prove.

A special word is due to Miss de Valois's performance as the tightrope walker. In the original production she danced with Dolin as Cook's man, and the audience was justly enthusiastic. She has rather a forte for coquetry on the stage.

OTHER BALLETS.

Miss de Valois has produced over a score of ballets for the Vic-Wells company. While space does not permit of detailed reference to many, one most successful effort can scarcely be left without comment. Another truly British production

was the choral ballet from Purcell's "Fairy Queen," entitled "The Birthday of Oberon." This is a most satisfactory production from every point of view. As one critic said, "for beauty and ingenuity, imagination and variety, Miss de Valois's choreography could scarcely have been bettered. Very possibly this is the best thing she has done." Choral ballet is a very pleasant medium, and one which is not sufficiently exploited. This masque-like production suggested the desirability of others to follow, for there is certainly plenty of musical material from the same source.

The majority of Miss de Valois's ballets lately have been to music by British composers. Among last year's productions was a setting of Elgar's Nursery Suite. This music was not written for ballet, but careful study and sympathetic comprehension made the most of it in this medium. Sir Edward was present at the first performance, and so great was its success as to make us hope for a ballet specially composed for the company, a hope which has most unfortunately had to be abandoned. "The Nursery Suite" remains a specially valued number of the repertoire.

Some indication of the remarkable variety to be found in her work is given by the dances in "The Golden Toy" which Miss de Valois arranged this winter for Sir Oswald Stoll. In an otherwise rather dreary production these are full of life and colour, and really carry the performance, contributing more to the desired Eastern atmosphere than could be achieved by all the stage architecture and costuming in the world, lavishly as these have been conceived.

BAR AUX FOLIES-BERGERE.

That Miss de Valois does not permit her diverse and arduous labours for the Vic-Wells to monopolise her completely, is evidenced by this very charming trifle which she has arranged for Marie Rambert, and which has now received a number of performances at The Mercury Theatre. In our youth most of us were probably forced at one time or another to "write a story" about certain rather hackneyed pictures. I remember basing a sufficiently harrowing affair which involved several drownings and much lamentation on that very mild work "The Fisherman's Cottage." But this is work of a rather different order. Miss de Valois gives us nothing which, having seen the ballet, does not appear to us to have been implicit in the picture from the first, and yet a very lively imagination has obviously been required to bring the painting to life. To Chabrier's music it moves rapidly for a short time, and then relapses into its former arrangement.

Most critics regarded this work as purely comic. It might have been, had Diana Gould's excellent Can-can fooling, and the fish-stories of the *habitués* been solely responsible for the atmosphere, but Pearl Argyle put so much sincerity and force into the deserted "Fille du Bar" that this mood rather dominated the performance. The story is the simplest possible. The "Fille du Bar" covets and has enjoyed the attentions of the waiter, but on the entrance of the Can-can dancers he is diverted by their leader, and after watching her performance and serving her with the utmost attention

he follows the crowd out, and “La Fille du Bar” is left to polish the glasses and arrange the bottles.

This ballet is an exceedingly finished and pleasing work. No doubt the present successful season at The Mercury will be the first of a number at which it will be performed.

CONCLUSION.

I first knew Miss de Valois as a member of the Diaghilev Ballet, with which I was associated for many years. To one with her acute and observant mind it afforded magnificent opportunity for the storing up of valuable experience, but no outlet for its employment. Thus her creative career began only after she had ceased to be a member of the ballet, but then it became creative in a double sense, for not only did she create ballets choregraphically, but she created the ballet to perform them. Much as I admire the fruits of her inventive imagination I admire still more the untiring energy which animates her and which, it appears, she contrives by some mysterious means to instil into others. To one with the creative impulse the fashioning of a work of art is such joy that the labour involved is scarcely considered, but the industry demanded by the tasks of daily routine involves constant effort. Not only does she face it without a murmur, but it leaves her always alert, always eager for fresh fields of activity. Of the quality of her imagination Miss Neatby has written eloquently.

I agree with Miss de Valois in considering "La Création du Monde" to be her best work. It was a feat to create a suggestion of awe by means of plastic movements which, in themselves, were not of a nature to inspire reverence. At the same time I regret that limitation of space has precluded a description of "Cephalus and Procris," which was a clever achievement in the opposite direction, that of piquant and sophisticated elegance. But perhaps I am partial, for it was I who suggested the music.

EDWIN EVANS.

APPENDIX.

PROGRAMME NOTES FOR "JOB."

Scene 1. Job is sitting in the sunset of prosperity with his wife, surrounded by his seven sons and three daughters. They all join in a pastoral dance. When they have dispersed, leaving Job and his wife alone, Satan enters unperceived. He appeals to Heaven, which opens, revealing the Godhead (Job's Spiritual Self) enthroned within. On the steps are the Heavenly Hosts. Job's Spiritual Self consents that his moral nature be tested in the furnace of temptation.

Scene 2. Satan, after a triumphal dance, usurps the throne.

Scene 3. Job's sons and daughters are feasting and dancing, when Satan appears and destroys them.

Scene 4. Job's peaceful sleep is disturbed by Satan with terrifying visions of War, Pestilence and Famine.

Scene 5. Messengers come to Job with tidings of the destruction of all his possessions and the death of his sons and daughters. Satan introduces Job's Comforters, three wily hypocrites. Their dance at first simulates compassion, but this gradually changes to rebuke and anger. Job rebels: "Let the day perish wherein I was born." He invokes his vision of the Godhead, but the opening Heaven reveals Satan upon the throne. Job and his friends shrink in terror.

Scene 6. There enters Elihu, who is young and beautiful. "Ye are old and I am very young." Job perceives his sin. The Heavens then open revealing Job's Spiritual Self again enthroned.

Scene 7. Satan again appeals to Job's Godhead, claiming the victory, but is repelled and driven down by the Sons of the Morning. Job's household build an altar and worship with musical instruments, while the heavenly dance continues.

Scene 8. Epilogue. Job sits, a humbled man, in the sunrise of restored prosperity, surrounded by his family, upon whom he bestows his blessing.

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Editor P. J. S. Richardson

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